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The ABCs of MXs, B-1s by an unretiring admiral

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"Killing us three times over instead of two times over is not a usable advantage. If we make it usable by saying we're scared, okay. But I'm scared because they've got one time capability to kill us. I'm not much more scared because they've got two or three."

Admiral Stansfield Turner, USN, retired, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, tapping the table for emphasis, was explaining why he doesn't believe in the "window of vulnerability," the 1980s version of the missile gap.

And while thinking aloud about the unthinkable, the former Rhodes Scholar who was Jimmy Carter's intelligence chief was urging, in very simple terms, that we all do likewise.

"We have to have public input to these decisions," said Turner, a fit, trim and polished man who will be 58 on Tuesday and who is spending a very active retirement writing and lecturing on geopolitics and consulting for big business on international affairs.

"There is going to be a real debate on military strength in the next couple years. It's always 'guns or butter' but now I mean people are feeling it, their Social Security is in danger, so the public is going to be interested."

The public can decipher the arcane anagrams of destruction and defense, B-1, MX, SS-20, if it asks the simple questions, Turner said.

And when the man who once coordinated the nation's entire intelligence apparatus describes the big picture, the issues take on a kind of hideous simplicity, easiness, informality.

We are "we," the Soviets are "they" — or, in the more intimate moment of nuclear exchange, "he" — and the military hardware becomes visible like markers on a gameboard.

Take this marker, for example, the MX missile.

The simple question is not how to hide it in silos or on racetracks, or if it would work, but a more important issue "that really didn't get addressed: Why do we need it?"

"Why do you need a bigger and more accurate weapon, under very quick response control? Well, you only need it if you're going to 'war-fight.' You need size because you're going to hit a hard target," not a city like Honolulu, not a base like Pearl Harbor. There are no hard targets in Hawaii, Turner says. "It's only in Nebraska," where the inter-continental ballistic missiles carrying nuclear warheads are hidden under ground and concrete, or in the same kinds of places in Russia.

"Okay, does this country want and need a capability on quick response to knock out very hard targets, principally the silos or shelters in the Soviet Union?"

"Now that's a question I think the public can grapple with."

Under what circumstances would such a weapon be used? Turner poses the question himself.

"Well, a first strike. Disable them. Now, do you want to prepare for that or not? I think the country would say no."

Can you use the MX for a second strike, in response to an attack?

Sure, "if it survives," and then "only to the extent that he hasn't emptied all his silos."

"It has some value, if he's got 1500 missiles and he's fired 1,000 of them and you've got 500 targets left and you can discriminate which are the empty ones, or you've got enough to hit 'em all and don't worry about hitting 1,000 empty ones, okay, yes, it's got some second-strike capability."

"It gives you some insurance that after he'd already fired a helluva lot that the last increment won't come."

"The other part of the rationale for the MX was that maybe he's only going to fire 50 the first time and then he's going to say to the president:

"Don't shoot back, boss, because I've got 1,450 left and if you shoot back they're going to come and we're both going to die and so why don't you just give in."

"That's a reasonable argument. I think it's like the old theologians on angels on the head of a pin, but okay, that's my opinion."

But, Turner goes on, tapping the table again to emphasize the words, "Do you WANT to BE prePARED for his starting a limited intercontinental war that he's going to feel that he can bluff you?"

"I just don't think that any rational leader of any country is going to say, 'By starting an intercontinental war, I'm really bound to come out ahead,' when we've got submarines and bombers and things that can respond no matter what."

"Either you're going to use those (MX) missiles in response to a limited attack or you're going to use them after a major exchange, to get something that's left over."

But a limited attack is "a low probability event" to which existing missile systems could respond, he said.

And a major exchange? "I'm not really worried whether we can continue fighting after several thousand of these things have been exchanged. I think we're going to be worried about picking up the dead and getting some water and a few other things rather than worried about can we knock him out some more."

Fortunately, from Turner's point of view, he believes President Reagan has "doomed" both the MX and the B-1 bomber systems by cutting them back to the point where they are no longer realistic.

"He couldn't do nothing," Turner said, for political and other reasons, "but what he did do was he cut them in half. He put the MX in a silly basing mode."

The charade will still cost a lot of money, Turner said, but "I hope Congress will reject the MX and save us some of that money."

The other thing Reagan did, Turner said, was order more Cruise missiles.

Cruise missile — another marker on the gameboard, and one that Turner says is the strategic weapon of the future.

Manned bombers and ICBMs "are both on their way out like the battleship and the cavalry," he said. The cruise missile, a long-range, jet-powered vehicle designed for launch from submarines (Reagan's option) or from aircraft, and able to fly low below enemy radar, will replace both ICBMs and bombers unless bombers are resurrected by the Stealth program to make them nearly invisible to radar.

Well, the big simple question, how do "we" compare with "him"?

There are three parts to the answer:

"In the strategic field," by which Turner means nuclear weapons, "I don't believe in a window of vulnerability because while we don't have as much as they do in some categories, megatonnage, destructive capability, we have more warheads than they do and can hit more targets than they."

The Soviet superiority is an overkill capability, he says.

"We can't sit on our oars, but we're not in extremis at this point."

"The second threat from the Soviets is to overrun Europe, conventionally, or with tactical nuclear weapons," without intercontinental nuclear war between us and them.

"They have more (conventional) power than we do." The problem "is less that they are capable of marching to the channel quickly than that they are beginning to terrify the Europeans — particularly because we and the Europeans build this up."

The answer, in Turner's view, is to beef up conventional forces in Europe, and the NATO countries there must shoulder most of that load themselves.

The only reason to deploy missiles in NATO countries now is political, he said. "They are not needed militarily." The threat can be met by missiles on submarines.

"Now the third area of possible military requirements: all the rest of the world."

The U.S. has to be ready not to patrol the globe but to respond in those places, many yet unknown, in which it decides it has "vital interests."

"We have forgotten in 36 years, that we are a maritime power, that we have to go overseas to project our power."

"Black Jack Pershing took the American EXPEDITIONARY Force overseas. We're not expeditionary any more. We have forgotten the basic tenet."

Turner says we need today "a three-fold punch":

- "A maritime capability to establish a military presence, largely by amphibious Marine Corp and Navy forces backed up by (aircraft) carriers.

- "To be followed immediately by a rapid airlift by the Air Force to get Army and Air Force units there in very quick order.

- "To be followed as quickly as ships will move by a sealift. You can't carry their food and bullets and stuff by air, so we need on both coasts pre-positioned fast ships loaded with basic supplies."

"We need to continue an emphasis on airlift ... which means building tanks which don't weigh 50 tons but weigh 15 tons, a whole remaking of the United States Army."

It will take at least ten years to build, but it will be useful even in the beginning because the expeditionary force doesn't have to be large to be effective. Speed can be more important than size when the job is to shore up a toppling government.

Can we stop Soviet adventurism around the world?

"I think we've got more opportunity to discourage Soviet adventurism today than we've had in a long time, because of their political and their economic weaknesses, both of which are becoming more and more apparent. Poland's problem is an economic one."

"We've got to shake our aversion to economic aid. Here we've got strength which the Soviets do not have. They cannot help these countries that they go meddle in with their basic problem which is their economy."

"You have to have military force to back up the diplomacy," and for the immediate circumstances Turner recommends moving two Marine amphibious forces, totaling about 4,000 men, into the Indian Ocean from their present assignments in the Western Pacific and the Mediterranean.

Then, "you're half way between the other two places they normally are, and the two in the Indian Ocean are much more likely to be a critical mass, they are enough to do the job."

He would support the Marines with two carriers in the Indian Ocean, both taken from the Mediterranean rather than the Pacific, because of the relative lack of military presence in the Pacific.

(Tomorrow in The Advertiser: Why did we "lose" Iran? Will we "lose" Saudi Arabia too?)